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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KIEV 000583

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/14/2016

TAGS: PHUM

SUBJECT: UKRAINE: IN THE MIDDLE OF ODESA, A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

REF: A. KIEV 578

1B. 05 KIEV 1712  
1C. 05 KIEV 1794

Classified By: Ambassador for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Two leaders of Odesa's small Presbyterian community asserted to us February 8 that the local actors guild had enlisted political help in an effort to seize the city's historic Presbyterian church. The actors wanted to turn the church, which has just gone through a 1.2 million USD renovation, into a private theater, according to our contacts. After filing a lawsuit challenging the Presbyterian community's claim to the property, the guild allegedly paid bribes to Mayor Hurvits and M.P. Les Tanyuk to influence the court's handling of the case and produce a "favorable" verdict. The guild has also been aided by the local head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), who reportedly chastised Hurvits for "allowing Protestants to have a church right in the middle of Odesa." While characterizing themselves as supporters of the Orange Revolution, our interlocutors expressed disappointment that under President Yushchenko their church's situation had not improved. End summary.

Property Restitution "Success Story" Gone Bad

2. (SBU) The leader of Odesa's small Presbyterian community, Pastor Valeriy Babuinin, and the director of the Odesa-based Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Ukraine, Dr. Clay Quarterman, told us February 8 that the municipal actors guild was enlisting political help to seize the historic Odesa Presbyterian Church. The church, which was built in 1896, confiscated during the Soviet era, and then legally restituted to Odesa's Presbyterian community in 1999, has just undergone a five-year, 1.2 million USD renovation, transforming it from a dilapidated, graffiti-covered homeless hangout into a modern church building with a state-of-the-art pipe organ.

Actors Get Help from the Mayor, an MP...

3. (C) Our contacts asserted that, once the renovations were completed, the Odesa Actors Guild filed a lawsuit challenging the Presbyterian church's right to the property; guild members also began "squatting" in the church's first-floor office space in an apparent effort to establish a claim to ownership. Babuinin related that the Actors Guild wanted to turn the renovated facility into a private, for-profit theater. To achieve that goal, the pastor claimed, the guild had paid significant bribes to Odesa Mayor Eduard Hurvits and M.P. Les Tanyuk, a famous actor who serves as the head of the Rada's Committee on Culture and Spirituality, to favorably "influence" the local court's handling of the case. Our contacts speculated that Hurvits and Tanyuk may have been promised a percentage of the future theater's receipts in exchange for their "assistance." The trial is currently postponed, with no trial date set.

...And the Moscow Patriarchate

4. (C) The guild has also reportedly enlisted Metropolitan Angafangel, the local leader of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (the local name for the Russian Orthodox Church), to support the eviction of the Presbyterians from the church. According to Quarterman and Babuinin, Angafangel recently paid a call on Mayor Hurvits, during which he allegedly berated Hurvits for "allowing Protestants to have a church right in the middle of Odesa." With Angafangel's blessing, the guild also used Odesa's vociferously pro-Russian media to slander the Presbyterian church, Babuinin said. Media outlets refused to allow the Presbyterians to respond, the pastor added. While describing themselves as supporters of the 2004 Orange Revolution, our contacts nonetheless criticized President Yushchenko. Echoing similar comments by Odesa's Roman Catholic Bishop (ref A), Pastor Babuinin said in the last 12 months "things have gotten worse for us."

Comment

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15. (C) We would note that while the situation for minority religious groups in Odesa is troubling, it is not representative of the country as a whole. From Czarist times, Odesa has been an unruly, crime-ridden port that, as a city, has set hair-raising standards for corruption and mismanagement (refs B-C). What is happening to Presbyterians in Odesa, as well as Roman Catholics, may be an unintended consequence of Yushchenko's April 2005 decision to abolish the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA). While badly flawed and widely criticized, the SCRA did help protect the interests of minority religious groups in Ukraine. Despite our contacts' disappointment that their situation may have worsened in the last year, blame for their worsening predicament should not be laid at the feet of the central government in Kiev, but rather to apparent UOC-MP hostility to the presence of other churches.

HERBST